

MINISTRY OF THE ENVIRONMENT

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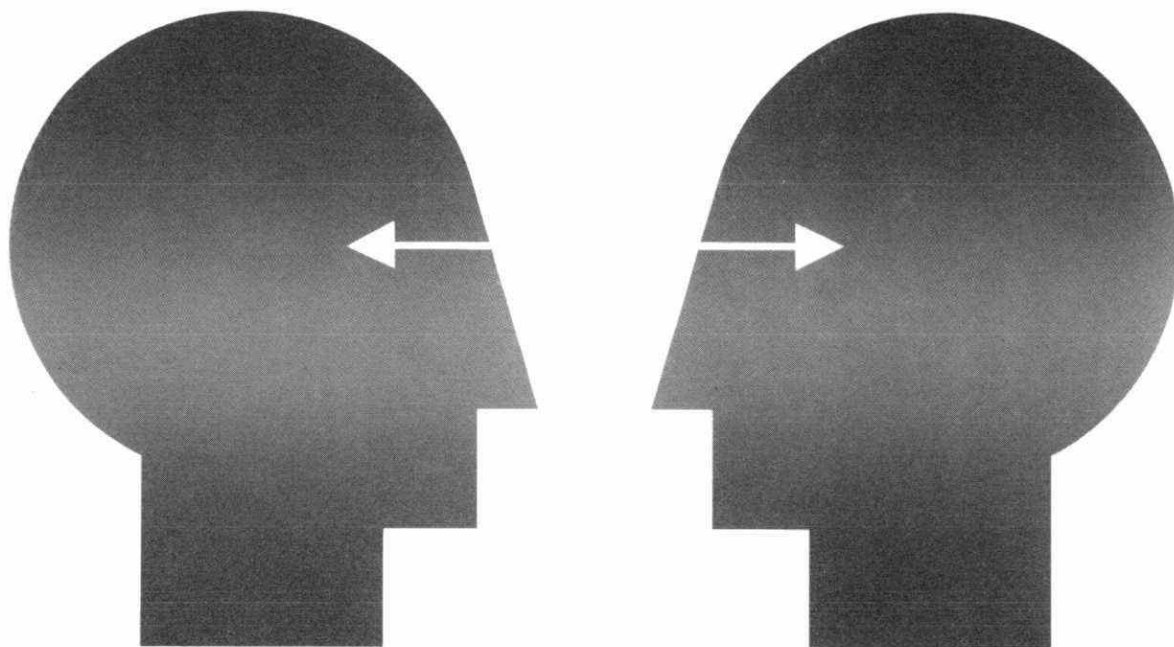
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HOLDING A SUCCESSFUL PUBLIC MEETING



A Public Involvement Guidebook

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Environment
Ontario

Jim Bradley, Minister

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WHAT IS A PUBLIC MEETING?

A public meeting is a structured forum, usually lasting only a few hours. It is led by a chairperson who follows a formal agenda and includes presentations and a question and answer period. It serves as a means to provide information and to share viewpoints.

A public meeting demonstrates a willingness to conduct business in the open. Its visibility constitutes one of its strengths.

The idea of holding a public meeting may appear simple. In fact, it requires careful thought and detailed planning. While such a forum provides the opportunity to make direct contact with the public, it also may create a complex, unpredictable and demanding situation.



WHY HOLD A PUBLIC MEETING?

- Ministry policy calls for a “public information session”, or a public meeting, before ordering a pollution abatement program.
- Ministry policy also calls for project proponents, including the ministry, to consult the public before preparing an environmental assessment for a project. This may involve holding a public meeting.
- You want:
 - to provide information about and get reaction to a discussion paper outlining proposed amendments to environmental legislation or regulations.
 - to explain how legislation or regulations affect the public.
 - to explain and solicit reactions to ministry plans, proposals or projects.
 - to discuss a specific issue or situation.

It is ministry policy that the public be consulted regularly. Public meetings should form one part of a broad consultation process.



SOME CHALLENGES YOU'LL FACE

- You will have one brief opportunity to set the proper tone for the meeting. A mistake or false impression may not be easily corrected.
- A public meeting assembles people with various points of view. Satisfying the entire audience may prove difficult. Make your meeting as productive as possible, but don't expect too much from it.
- You will have to be open to other people's concerns.
- Responding diplomatically to groups and individuals who raise concerns that do not fit into your agenda is important. Try to limit the meeting to subjects you have planned to discuss and which fall into your area of expertise.
- You will want people to express themselves, but many people are reluctant to speak in front of large groups.
- Too many agenda items may prevent you from covering anything in depth; focusing for too long on one specific point may make the audience impatient or inattentive.



PLANNING A PUBLIC MEETING

A well-run public meeting requires careful planning. You need to ask yourself some important questions. Why do you want to hold a public meeting? Is a public meeting the best means for accomplishing your goal? Who should attend? What do you want to tell people? What do you want to learn from them? What materials do you need?

Begin consulting the Communications Branch as soon as you decide to hold a public meeting. Your Project Co-ordinator will help you plan the meeting and address your communications needs.

Advertisements

The most successful advertising campaign begins well in advance of a meeting. The Communications Branch is responsible for the writing and placing of all advertising. Contact your Project Co-ordinator as soon as you have decided to hold a meeting.

News releases

A news release is designed to inform members of the media of the purpose, place, date and time of a public meeting. It gives some background information on the topic to be discussed. It may state the ministry's position on the matter. It provides the names and telephone numbers of ministry contacts.

News releases must be prepared and distributed ahead of time. Write a memo to your Project Co-ordinator in the Communications Branch, providing essential facts about the meeting.

Other steps

Effective promotion requires more than advertising and news releases. Your goal is to identify and involve all those who may be interested in attending your meeting. You may wish to:

- Ask community and other groups to inform their members of your meeting.
- Have a public service announcement prepared and distributed.
- Distribute newsletters or flyers door to door.
- Personally contact journalists and others to remind them about your meeting.

Services in French

Under the *French Language Services Act*, ministries must provide French services in 22 designated areas of the province. Consult the Communications Branch or the French Services Office about what French services may be needed.



FORMAT

Getting ready

Always go over the presentations that will be made at a public meeting. Practise ahead of time with someone who is not familiar with the issues. Make your presentations short and understandable. Don't rely on overheads or slides. Anticipate questions and practise answering them.

How you dress should be appropriate to the occasion and the audience.

Agenda

A public meeting is useful for exchanging information and views. The agenda should be designed so there is time for people to react to and ask questions about the presentations. Following a realistic agenda will increase the likelihood that people will feel the meeting has been worthwhile.

The chairperson

Appoint a chairperson before the meeting. In most cases, the chairperson will be a ministry staff person. However, it may be better to ask a more independent person to chair the meeting.

A record of proceedings

Assign someone to take detailed notes of the proceedings.

If the proceedings are to become a matter of public record, arrange to have the meeting recorded so an accurate transcript can be prepared.



THE MEETING

Post neat, clear signs that direct people to the meeting place. Display brochures, fact sheets, copies of the agenda and other materials near the entrance to the meeting room. Have a comment sheet available for people to fill out as they leave.

Arrange tables and chairs according to the needs of your audience. If few people are expected, place the chairperson and speakers at floor level.

Greet people as they enter. Ask people to write their names and addresses in a guest book (you may wish to contact them later). As you welcome people, listen carefully to their opinions about issues related to the meeting. Encourage them to express their ideas. Start the meeting on time; explain any delay.

Your meeting has begun. The chairperson should welcome the audience and explain the purpose of the meeting, go over the agenda and remind people to sign the guest book.

All those making presentations, including the chairperson, should be introduced. As well, the chairperson should ask people to identify themselves before asking a question or making a statement. The chairperson should remain flexible but may need to tell somebody: "Thank you for your point" and proceed to recognize the next speaker.

The chairperson should accept strong opinions but shouldn't let people disrupt the meeting. As well, if someone wishes to discuss something not on the agenda, the chairperson should ask the audience its preference.

Give honest and brief answers. Avoid unnecessary jargon. When you must use jargon or technical terms, explain what they mean. Speak only about issues within your area of expertise. Don't be afraid to refer a question to someone else or to say: "I'm sorry, I don't know", ask the person for their name and telephone number so that you can provide an answer later.

Treat people with respect. Don't debate. Never shout. Accept criticism and don't take it personally. Don't insult people.

At the end of the meeting, summarize the major conclusions or actions to be taken.



AFTER THE MEETING

Hold a de-briefing session. Include all staff who attended the meeting. Evaluate the meeting. Discuss what happened. Summarize in writing the results and evaluation.

Act quickly on promises to contact people and provide information. Send any summary of the meeting to people who have signed your guest book.

For more information about public consultation planning or public consultation training, contact your Communications Branch Project Co-ordinator.

☒ **CHECKLIST (PHOTOCOPY FIRST)**

- ☐ decide to hold a public meeting
- ☐ contact the Communications Branch
 - ☐ select a meeting date
 - ☐ prepare a communications plan
 - ☐ determine a budget
 - ☐ determine French language needs
- ☐ choose a location
 - ☐ order refreshments
 - ☐ prepare signs
 - ☐ determine arrangement for tables and chairs
 - ☐ order AV equipment
- ☐ select and order materials
- ☐ determine who is making presentations
 - ☐ prepare an agenda
 - ☐ practice the presentations
 - ☐ prepare name tags
- ☐ select a chairperson
- ☐ determine who is taking minutes
- ☐ prepare invitations
- ☐ prepare press kits
- ☐ contact media/community groups
- ☐ set up displays/arrange materials
- ☐ hold a de-briefing session
 - ☐ prepare meeting summary
- ☐ send out follow-up materials

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